DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 388 FL 016 837

AUTHOR Mazur, Gertrud S.
TITLE Communicative Competence in the Beginning Foreign Language Class: Problems and Suggestions.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Selecta; v7 p77-83 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Classroom Techniques; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Educational Objectives; *Instructional Materials; Introductory Courses; Language Attitudes; Language Proficiency; Language Teachers; Language Tests; Media Adaptation; Oral Language; Power Structure; Second Language Instruction; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Behavior

ABSTRACT

Problems in the second language classroom that hinder students from speaking the language freely and creatively arise from three sources: the teacher, the student, and the material. Problems involving the teacher include the common lack of an overall and inclusive definition of the course goal, the role and dysfunction of teacher "authority" in the classroom, and unrealistic performance expectations. Problems concerning the learner include attitudes about the language, unrealistic expectations of the course, frequent correction, and perceptions of linguistic discrepancies between himself and the teacher, all leading to frustration. Problems with materials concern primarily the sequencing and presentation. The first step in solving these problems is a firm commitment to communicative competence and oral proficiency as the single course goal. Classwork can be adjusted to meet that goal more simply than it might seem possible. It is also necessary to retain the appeal to the affective domain, allowing for self-expression while fostering interpersonal contact, and change testing methods to focus on expansion of oral skills. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED285388

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE BEGINNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS: PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

Gertrud S. Mazur
Washington State University

FL016837

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. Verzasconi

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE BEGINNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASS: PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS

Gertrud S. Mazur
Washington State University

The recent history of Foreign Language (FL) teaching has been beset by continuing controversies and discussions about contents, structures, and methods, as well as goals of teaching. In our latest scholarly books and journals, the battle lines seem drawn again, and the FL teacher today flounders in a morass of concepts and terminology; it has become a nearly full-time proposition now to keep up with many ideas and suggestions, with the recipes and dogmas, all of which promise to the practitioner better results in the classroom.[1] The surprising aspect, however, is the fact that the arguments in vogue today are no longer concerned exclusively with the pros and cons of given methodological stances. Rather, the concern is for short-range as well as long-range goals in the FL classroom.

We cannot help but be aware of one new emphasis in FL teaching: "Oral proficiency" has become the slogan heard everywhere. Whether we are ready for it or not, this teaching objective is being implemented at numerous educational institutions, high schools and universities.[2] The trend leads away from the quantitative semester or year requirements in FL and toward a specified level of achievement for each type of student. With the advent of the "oral proficiency" concept, the teaching profession is moving to the establishment of quantitatively and qualitatively measurable FL teaching goals which are independent of the approaches and methods used to achieve them. Analyzing the debate in our professional journals, however, leads one to conclude that the battle cry "oral proficiency" is opposed by that of "communicative competence." Although here is not the place to recapitulate arguments on either side of the issue, the FL teacher benefits greatly by examining the underlying concepts of both.

The coded levels of "oral proficiency" provide the explanation for this goal goal, but what is meant by "communicative competence"? This concept refers to the situationally discriminating criteria of language internalized by the speaker which allow the speaker that mode of expression which is appropriate to any given situation of speaking. The objective of "communicative competence" has been around for over ten years; through the European "functional-notional" approach in FL teaching, it has received additional impetus.[3] Both aims incorporate and verbalize the profession's concern over the FL student's lack of speaking ability after a full course of study.

Indeed, one of the most persistently difficult tasks the FL teacher faces is that of getting students to use the new language orally, freely, and creatively if possible. We continue to insist upon this goal because we appreciate its significance. Yet, for the most part, we make little or no headway toward reaching it. Instead, we resort to comforting ourselves with the impossible realities of the classroom situation. For some, the greatest consolation lies in the <u>future</u> speaking proficiency of a few students who fortunately will participate in a travel, exchange, or work-abroad program, and there--submerged in the target language--they will finally, surely learn to speak it fluently. A costly com-

fort, I submit, because it involves great loss of potential learning by the largest number of students.

In order to reach the twin goals (for we must accept and integrate both) of "oral proficiency" and "communicative competence," we first need to identify and define the problems in the classroom that hinder students in speaking the FL. They pertain to three areas: the teacher, the student, and the material.

The problem complex involving the teacher goes beyond the usual complaint of inadequate preparation in subject matter. Rather, it focuses in this context on three specific aspects, namely, the common lack of an overall-inclusive definition of the course goal, the role and dysfunction of teacher "authority" in the classroom and, exacerbating the difficulties, unrealistic performance expectations on the part of the teacher.[4] The welter of ideas, concepts, and methods confronting the FL teacher yields one definite insight: no matter what we may think, the FL per se is <u>not</u> the goal of instruction, rather it is the <u>use</u> of the FL. This recognition leads us toward investigating the division between "knowledge" and "use." This division has so often been--perhaps even inadvertently--established in the classroom, and it greatly hinders production of the spoken language. Should we indeed maintain the following distinctions between "knowledge" and "use"?

<u>Cognitive Mode</u>	<u>Affective Mode</u>
knowledge of the language	appropriate situational use of language
competence	performance
learning	acquisition
reception	production
passivity	activity

After examining each item in both columns, it quickly becomes obvious that all are desiderata, that FL teachers to be most efficient in their tasks must recognize and realize the reciprocal relationships involved in these principles. As Higgs states, " ... they are not mutally exclusive but mutually supportive."[5]

The transformational-generative mode of teaching indeed engages the mind of the student through its cognition of references; however, the intellectual second-language storage functions of our students are not fully prepared for the tasks of retention.[6] We adapted the concept of a native speaker's knowledge of the language and the situational use he/she makes of it into the FL teacher's standards and course objectives of "competence" and "performance." Thus, the problem in getting students to speak the new language is identified: it is located in the transfer stage between "competence", i.e., knowledge of the language, and "performance," i.e., the act of freely and creatively using the language.[7] Instead of separating these two functions--and grading them separately--FL teachers must strive to combine them, merge them into the goal of both "oral proficiency" and "communicative competence."

In analyzing the teacher's role of "authority" in the classroom, we need only measure the ratio of time the teacher speaks, explains, demonstrates, elucidates, etc. with that of the speaking time for students, or--even more illustrative--with that of the individual student. No wonder FL students feel intimi-

dated, rarely volunteer to speak. Isn't it, therefore, necessary, to examine and adopt teaching strategies that allow maximum class speaking time for students? Earl M. Rickerson reports on an experiment in which the introduction of new materials (e.g., all points of grammar), the pattern drills, dialogs, etc. were presented to students of Chinese on laboratory tapes, in workbooks, and in grammar notes while the "practicing" of language only took place in the classroom "relegating" the teacher to primus inter pares status. This approach yielded surprisingly good results.[8]

Not only students but also teachers enter the classroom with unrealistic performance expectations: the often heard question of when and how often to correct students' utterances is indicative of the conflict. Of course, to avoid fossilization of errors, we must insist that students--at least over time--use the language accurately; but in the beginning stages of FL learning the need for encouragement should outweigh that for correction, as long as the student is able to communicate his/her message. Repeating the fractured statement in correct form is initially all that is necessary. Furthermore, in a beginning language class, even single-word contributions spontaneously offered by students are deserving of praise.

One more point in connection with the "authority" role: regardless of the method employed by teacher and textbook, the various memory capabilities of the learner must be exploited, e.g., not only the audio or visual memory banks need activating, the kinetic (motor) memory must also be utilized through classroom activities that permit reinforcement of speaking. The teacher must relinquish the position of focal point in front of the class. Letting students move about reduces the authoritative mode of teaching.

Let us now turn to the learner who constitutes the second problem area. To begin, brief mention must be made of the fact that while the FL teaching profession has long continued to be concerned with and talked about teaching strategies, in the past (and even now), little attention has been paid to learning strategies, although some general theories pertaining to maximizing the learner's potential do exist. Given our particular subject matter, the FL teacher ought to develop expertise in this area.

I have used the phrase "foreign language(s)" deliberately because no matter how abhorrent the psychological implications of the term "foreign" may appear to us, that is how the student thinks of the language he/she is about to learn. It is at best something "foreign/alien" in his/her view, it is at worst something "strange, weird, exotic." In addition, the learner labors under at least one unrealistic expectation when entering a FL class: he/she (and their parents?) expects shortly to <u>speak</u> the language! Naturally, this expectation remains unfulfilled, producing a state of disappointment which in turn is deepened by the painfully slow progress of learning. Moreover, the student perhaps feels exposed to frequent corrections by a teacher who insists upon the right pronunciation, on idiomatic usage, and on correct grammatical patterns. All these factors combine to evoke steadily accruing resentment and frustrations in the student, a state of mind not conducive to assimilating the language and becoming communicatively competent.

The learner's "age discrepancies" with which he/she must cope also should be noted, though the teacher rarely admits that they are problematic. These "age

discrepancies" matter emotionally to the student and allowances must be made for them. In terms of the FL, the learner's linguistic age is that of an infant, contrasting sharply with his/her biological, emotional, and intellectual ages.[9] The FL student may wish to express personal ideas, wishes, plans, opinions, etc. but is greatly handicapped by his/her linguistic FL inability. If stifled for long in this manner, the student will cease trying to speak altogether.

The third problem area is to be found in the arrangement of materials, specifically in the presentation and/or sequencing of it. How much do we rely on what is perhaps our foremost teaching aid, the textbook, and how often does it prove to be more of a hindrance than a help? The pitfalls incorporated in the traditional sequencing of grammar are now beginning to be investigated; the final results will be a while in coming.[10] In fact, however, textbook writers, editors, and even publishers (because of economic dictates!) often exert more authority over the FL classroom than the teacher, who for reasons of convenience accepts their collective fiat. Thus, he/she is tied to a specific sequence of grammar units which "feature"--through texts and dialogs--fixed sets of vocabulary items. All too often the teacher, though constrained by these factors, believes himself/herself duty-bound to adhere to them and lets propitious classroom atmosphere and student motivation go by the wayside.

To make a bad matter worse, no textbook comes without a plethora of dialogs and dialog patterns in which the American tourist/student abroad is learning the ropes from some native Pierre, Carlos, Ivan, or Helmut! Our frustrated, resentful learner is invited to comprehend their problems and memorize their conversations. The textbook assumes that the student, having studied the prescribed patterns of grammar, is now happily "competent" to "perform" like a native. The result is that students and teachers are disappointed! The transfer between "knowledge" of the FL and the affective "use" of it remains grossly impaired because textbook dialogs for the most part ignore the affective traits of real conversation. Talking with people indicates emotional involvement (if only at the lowest level) on the part of the speakers. The very purpose of talking denotes desire for obtaining or exchanging information, or of establishing/maintaining contact with others. Textbook-dialogs are devoid of affective appeal; more or less lifelike figures converse: their relevance in the ears of the student is nonexistent.

Moreover, from a multiplicity of choices (vocabulary, idioms, grammatical and syntactical structures, intonation patterns) the native speaker opts for those appropriate to the situation, intuitively basing his/her selections upon diverse personal needs and criteria, e.g., mood, state of health, education, time of day, etc. By contrast, the textbook dialog of necessity omits or must largely neglect these aspects, since its parameters are strictly prescribed by whatever grammatical unit is to be introduced and practiced. The teacher, therefore, who never closes the textbook, who rather prefers to follow it as closely as possible, contributes to the problem for the student who by now is numbed with fear of the new language.

This same teacher might--benevolently of course--further compound the difficulties and further confuse the learner by insisting that the student speak only in complete sentences. This demand, often explained as "pronunciation and/or speaking practice," may become the proverbial last straw for the student: he/she

clams up for good. However, in the native, "natural" use of language we do not always and necessarily speak in full sentences. Very often phrases or even single words suffice to convey meaning (e.g., "You??????" "No!!!!"). Thus, although we might be able to convince students of the excellent reasons behind our insistence on full-sentence responses in the FL, we are, in fact, contravening, suppressing natively absorbed flow-patterns of language: we are demanding unnatural linguistic behavior which only impedes creative speech production. Pronunciation practive is desirable but practice in this manner will, over time, take place at the cost of voluntary, spontaneous utterances.

The first inevitable step to solve these dilemmas is a commitment to communicative competence and oral proficiency as the course goal. Sharing this commitment with the learner is equally important. Only if emphasis in classwork and in testing reflects the new standard will students believe the serious intent. Adjusting the classwork is not as difficult as it may seem at first. Keeping in mind that students are not just to know (i.e., know about) the FL, they are above all going to use (i.e., speak) it, the teacher can adjust textbook dialogs by substituting students and their situations for the textbook speakers, or supply supplementary materials (see below).

A propitious classroom atmosphere is one where corrections and teacher talk are at a minimum, where students talk and talk with each other. Instead of sitting passive and receptive in their chairs, students from the beginning are to be actively involved with the materials. The teacher wisely chooses topics (see the oral proficiency "novice" ratings) whose affective contents relate to the ego of the learner (e.g., family, home, friends, hobbies, plans, etc.).[11] At this initial state, there is no reason why the student should imitate patterns of the target culture. In the very beginning it is of crucial importance to get learners to speak the language and to make doing so appear natural.

Vocabulary not available in the first few lessons of the textbook can be supplied (e.g., perhaps the question words, numbers, days of the week, months, seasons, the words for family members, colors, etc.). There is no reason why a class period cannot be used for group work, e.g., writing/lettering construction paper for display. In fact, making lists or lettering display signs teaches not only dictionary skills but also spelling, writing, and reading in the FL.

At this threshold level, teacher expectation should not be too high. Single-word utterances or couplets of dialog may be all that is forthcoming for a while. Yet even this limited oral activity must be nurtured, e.g., through questionnaires which ask: "What is your name?" or "Where do you live?" Students answer for themselves, ask the questions of classmates, write the answers, add a question, etc. Games with simple objects may be played. Simple couplets like: "Hi, my name is ... What is yours?" or "My name is ..., nice to meet you!" are the starts of dialogs. The "chain dialog" as described by W. Rivers works well even in beginning classes.[12] A variation of this device is the "add-on dialog" (very much in the nature of "The house that Jack built").

As vocabulary and knowledge of grammatical structures increase, the possibilities are endless; "What is it?" "Who am I?" games, "show and tell" activities with simple objects, children's card games, etc. Through the addition of a "secretary" function (one or more students write), the writing skills are also practiced.

The fact that our students are experts in commercials can be exploited for FL use. An "ad competition" can prove to be a great tool of learning; the ad must be written, edited, and rewritten, and taped or enacted on videotape for judgment by a "jury" of classmates.[13]

It is imperative to retain all along the appeal to the affective domain, allowing for self-expression and self-esteem while simultaneously fostering interpersonal contacts in the FL.[14] Though devoting part of class time to the learning of grammar, the students gain in ease of speaking. One must then finally adjust the testing patterns. Since the emphasis on speaking has been expanded, oral skills must be tested and weighed equally with the "grammar knowledge" grade. Acquainting students with the oral test format can be done intermittently during the school term, starting perhaps with a five-minute interview after the first three weeks (or even earlier) and continuing thereafter on a regular basis for ten, eventually fifteen-minute interviews every two or three weeks. The final interview may be as long as twenty minutes.

Notes

[1]Heidi Byrnes, "Grammar--Communicative Competence--Functions/Notions: Implications for and from a Proficiency Orientation," Unterrichtspraxis, 17 (1984), pp. 194-206. See also: Theodore V. Higgs, "Language Acquisition and Language Learning: A Plea for Syncretism," Modern Language Journal, 69, No. 1 (Spring 1985), pp. 8-14, and Sandra J. Savignon, "Evaluation of Communicative Competence: The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines," Modern Language Journal, 69, No. 2 (Summer 1985), pp. 129-134.

[2]Karen Smith, "The USC Proficiency-Based Program in Foreign Language Instruction: Methods and Their Effects on Achievement and Motivation," Unterrichtspraxis, 17 (1984), pp. 240-254.

[3]See Byrnes pp. 199-200. See also Gail Guntermann & June K. Phillips, Functional-Notional Concepts: Adapting the Foreign Language Textbook (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1982), and Ruprecht S. Bauer & Peter Grzybek, "Zur (Re-) Integration natürlicher Verhaltensformen in den Fremdsprachenunterricht," Zielsprache Deutsch, 2 (1984), pp. 24-33.

[4]Earl M. Rickerson, "Curriculum for Proficiency: Concepts to Build On," Unterrichtspraxis, 17 (1984), pp. 207-224.

[5]Higgs, p. 9.

[6]Kenneth Chastain, The Development of Modern Language Skills: Theory to Practice (Philadelphia: The Center for Curriculum Development, 1971), p. 85.

[7]See Stephen D. Krashen, "The Monitor Model for Adult Second Language Performance," Viewpoints on English as a Second Language, ed. Marina Burt, Heidi Dulay & Mary Finocchiaro (New York: Regents, 1977), pp. 152-161, and Krashen, Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition (New York: Pergamon, 1982).

[8]See Rickerson, pp. 207-224.

[9]See Higgs and the two works by Krashen.

[10]Christine Jensen, Janet Christou Constantinides, and Klaus Dieter Hanson, "Natural Order of Acquisition of German Syntactic Structures vs. Order of Presentation in Elementary German Textbooks in the U.S.," Unterrichtspraxis, 16 (1983), pp. 199-211.

[11]Pardee Lowe, Jr., "The ILR Oral Interview: Origins, Applications, Pitfalls, and Implications," Unterrichtspraxis, 16 (1983), pp. 230-244. The "Novice" levels there read: "Novice-Low: Unable to function in the spoken language. Oral production is limited to occasional isolated words. Essentially no communicative ability. Novice-Mid: Able to operate only in a very limited capacity within very predictable areas of need. Vocabulary limited to that necessary to express simple elementary needs ...," p. 240.

[12]Wilga Rivers, et al., A Practical Guide to the Teaching of German (New York: Oxford, 1975), p. 35-38. This is a book in a series of parallel texts by Rivers: A Practical Guide to the Teaching of ... French, Spanish, English. All provide hundreds of examples for classroom use in each of the target languages.

[13]Ideas for oral practice in the classroom are not difficult to come by: French Review, Hispania, Unterrichtspraxis, Modern Language Journal, Foreign Language Annals, etc. feature a wealth of articles about ideas, suggestions for honing students' speaking skills.

[14]Gilbert A. Jarvis, "The Psychology of Second-Language Learning: A Declaration of Independence," Modern Language Journal, 67, No. 4 (Winter 1983), pp. 393-402. See also Krashen and Higgs.